A MARSHALL CAVENDISH COLLECTION 21 IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS

21 Stridor, Lord of the Snowy Mountains

Facing up to the White Death

Julek Heller

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From a story by Frank Graves

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On the Twenty-First Day . . .

Tread lightly on the rocky heights,
A sudden fall, a triple plight.
An evil comes, an evil goes
Buried under sliding snows.
Remember though, when far ahead,
Trapped is not the same as dead.
Nor is haste the same as speed
Nor the led the one to lead.

On through the snow the trio battled, barely able to see in front of them. "We're caught in a blizzard. We've got to get to the mountains as quickly as possible and get some shelter," Richard said, his lips numb with cold. "If we stay in the open, we're dead."

They stumbled on with renewed purpose, but when they reached the mountains, their progress became slower. The valleys were choked with deep snowdrifts.

"Let's rope up!" Richard shouted.

The blizzard redoubled in intensity. It growled and thundered forward like an elemental beast, pressing down on them with the full weight of masses of airborne ice and snow.

Richard had just traversed a particularly treacherous slope, and Orkan was halfway across, when the scribe lost his footing and slid downhill. The sudden jerk on the rope pulled both Orkan and Richard off their feet. They scrabbled for a handhold but it was no use. They followed their companion in a headlong, downhill slide, until their descent was stopped abruptly by a deep snowdrift.

Macabre shelter

"Ouch!" Melek groaned as first Orkan, and then Richard landed on top of him.

"There's no point carrying on in these conditions," Orkan said. "We'd better wait here for things to improve. Let's look for some shelter."

The others looked doubtful as Orkan strode round the snowdrift. The snow had piled on to a large boulder and, behind it, a crack split the mountainside. The three scrambled in out of the storm and found themselves in a narrow passage. Without hesitation, Orkan led the way into the mountain.

The stone corridor opened out on to a stark, jagged dome. The walls and floor of the cave shone under a thick coat of ice and, Melek noticed with a shudder, several partly devoured carcasses had been left lying around on natural stone shelves.

"Let's have a look at the *Book of Prophecies* while we wait for the storm to die down," Richard said, "then we must press on."

Melek unstrapped the book and read out the mysterious lines.

"The triple plight is clear enough," Richard said, "but I can't make sense of the last three lines. It's a warning of some kind, though."

Melek shrugged and shouldered the book again. While they had been discussing the riddle, the storm had abated. When they came out of the cave, they saw slopes of virgin snow that shone in weak sunlight. Everything was still and calm. After the fury of the blizzard it all seemed quite unreal. For a moment they had the impression that they were alone in a new and pristine world. Then echoing through the silence came a deep howl.

"What was that?" Richard asked. "Melek, do you know about anything living in this area from your books?"

Lord of the Mountains

"It could be a large snow cat, or it could be something worse," the scribe said with a grim look on his face. "I once came across a reference to a creature called Stridor who lives in the Snowy Mountains. He's believed to be the missing link between apes and mankind. He guards the way to the Forgotten City."

"Something tells me we've stumbled into his larder," Orkan grumbled. "We'd better get away as quickly as we can."

A second howl, plaintive and cold,

scoured the hillside. The companions froze motionless outside the entrance to the cave. The howl came again, but this time it was closer. Richard peered into the distance.

Far below, he could see a thickset, furry creature coming up the hill towards them. It was round-bodied, with long arms and powerful legs, all covered in a furze of straight, brown hair. A large deer was slung across its powerful shoulders.

As it approached, Richard saw that the creature's face was strikingly human, rubbery and wrinkled into dark, clean-edged segments. Now and then the creature stopped and sniffed the air, his gaping nostrils quivering as they pointed in Richard's direction.

"I think Melek could be right," Richard said. "This must be Stridor. We've got to get away from here."

The three hurled themselves forward without hesitation. The new snow was deep and sticky. The three floundered waist-deep in drifts, freeing themselves only to find their legs encased in heavy white gaiters. Stridor, on the other hand, was in his element and his furry legs moved through the snow with ease.

White wilderness

Richard's main aim had been to gain height. If they headed downhill Stridor would have caught them easily. Now the new fall of snow had changed the landscape, creating cliffs and overhangs that had not been there before and had been invisible from below.

Richard fumbled in his pocket and drew out the Path Finder. The glassy surface caught the pale sunlight and, before he could point it anywhere, Stridor was upon him. With a terrible grunt, the creature seized the instrument and gazed at his prize in fascination.

ECHOES OF DOOM

Richard flew into action. This was no time for fear or calculations. Without the Path Finder, they would never find their way out of the mountains. He took out Juroot's dagger and rolled over in the snow until he was within striking distance of the mountain creature.

Stridor gave a fierce howl as the blade sank deep into his foot and the Path Finder flew into the air. In the same instant as Richard caught the instrument, Stridor sprang up in pain, his cry echoing back and forth until the mountains rang like a tuning fork.

The sound rose and fell until it touched a frequency that was familiar to the fragile precipice. The uppermost lip began to crumble. Then in one pelting rush, the whole mountain slumped into avalanche.

Richard, Orkan and Melek were swept off their feet by the snow. Even Stridor was bowled over as boulders and trees hurtled past at colossal speed. The three were carried helplessly to the bottom of the mountain. When the avalanche had finally run its course they were buried under an untold depth of snow.

An ice-cold grave

Richard found himself in what seemed to be a freezing coffin. He clawed frantically at snow in front of his face and dug his way in the direction he hoped was up.

The snow was loosely packed and soon he was in the open, gasping for air in his clogged nostrils and mouth. To his right he saw a shoe lying on the ground. He gave it a tug and found it was attached to Melek's leg. After a little while he managed to uncover the spluttering scribe, who had been buried upside down.

There was no sign of Orkan anywhere. Richard and Melek scanned the landscape in vain for signs of movement.

"Watch out," Melek cried suddenly.

A sword had lanced upwards through the snow, narrowly missing Richard's foot. He stepped hastily to one side and watched as Orkan cut his way to freedom.

"Rub your faces," Richard muttered through chattering teeth. "We must get our circulation going." Their hands and faces were almost blue.

"We'd better get going again," Orkan said after a while, "but which way should we head?"

"That way," Richard replied, checking the Path Finder.

There, beyond the Snowy Mountains, the three could see the ochre slabs of lower, more hospitable hills.

"Stridor must have been buried in the avalanche, but he might have survived," Richard said. "If he has, we must pray that he won't leave his mountain home."

Into the valley

The companions fell into line and made their way towards the valley. They remained alert, ready to run if they heard or saw anything that suggested Stridor might be on their trail once again. None of them felt safe until they reached the end of the valley. Then below them they saw the browns and yellows of a world that was not immersed in perpetual winter.

Beyond the Snowy Mountains lay a series of jagged hills. Here and there small fields had been carved out of the hillsides. Clumps of yellowing pasture intruded on the woodland. In one place they could see a bridge that had once spanned a precipitous mountain river.

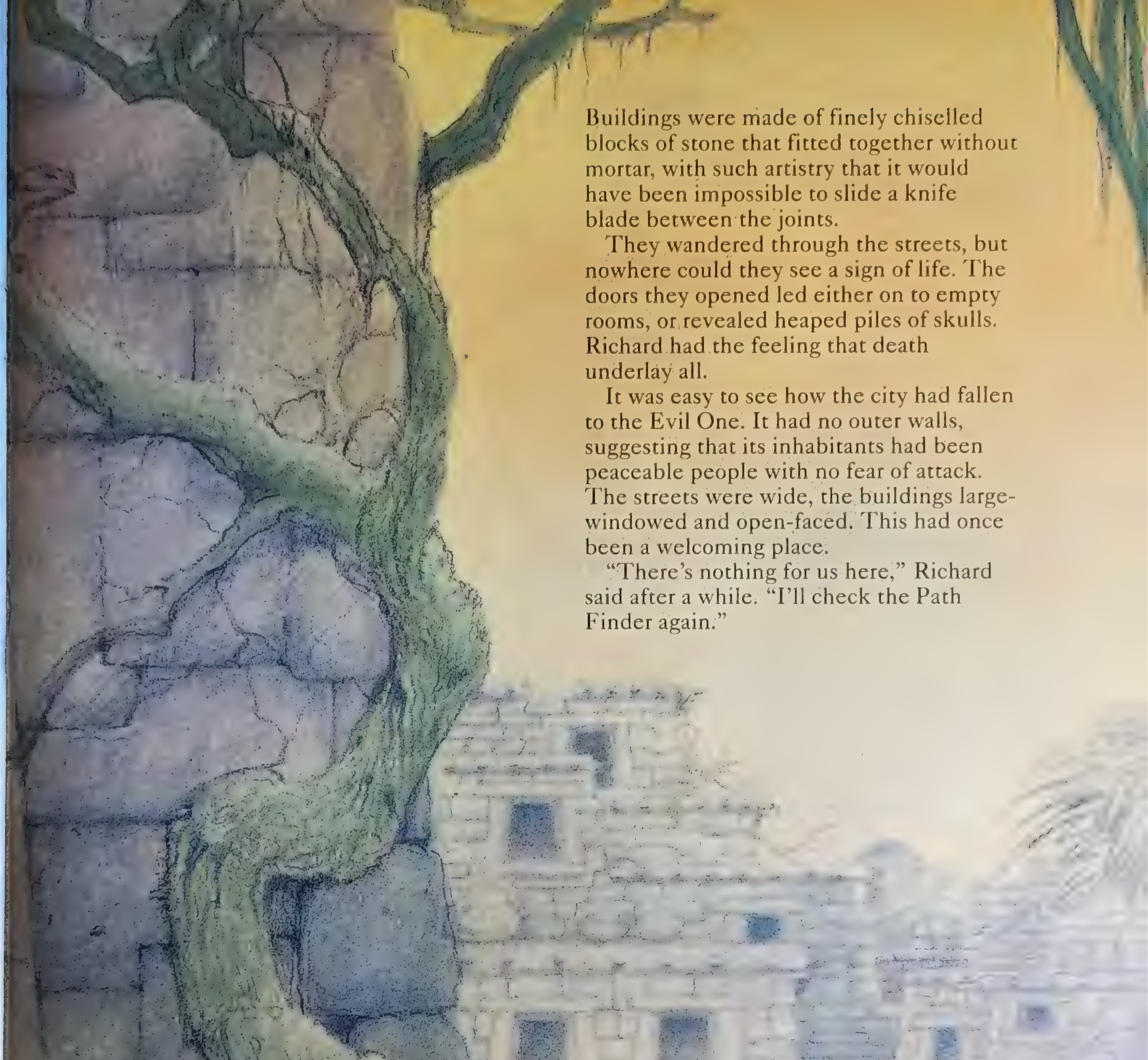
The Forgotten City

Further along, clustering below several small hills, the trio thought they could make out the neat outlines of many buildings. They trudged down the slopes, crossed the snowline and entered the pastures they had glimpsed from above. The grass was long and golden, fenced off by a disintegrating line of oak rails.

Then they came to it – a whole city hidden between the hills.

"It must be the Forgotten City," Melek said.

The three entered a city of architectural wonder.



Buildings were made of finely chiselled blocks of stone that fitted together without mortar, with such artistry that it would have been impossible to slide a knife blade between the joints.

They wandered through the streets, but nowhere could they see a sign of life. The doors they opened led either on to empty rooms, or revealed heaped piles of skulls. Richard had the feeling that death underlay all.

It was easy to see how the city had fallen to the Evil One. It had no outer walls, suggesting that its inhabitants had been peaceable people with no fear of attack. The streets were wide, the buildings large-windowed and open-faced. This had once been a welcoming place.

"There's nothing for us here," Richard said after a while. "I'll check the Path Finder again."

The instrument glowed gold when Richard pointed it at one of the peaks that rose high above the city.

"The pod is somewhere up there," Richard said, dreading the thought of another hard trek.

As they started to climb, the three felt mounting apprehension. In the pasture lay the skeletons of cattle, their desiccated hides stretched tight over white bones. The Evil One's influence extended even to this remote spot.

Then the fields that surrounded the city gave way to slides of shale, studded with the occasional wind-blasted tree. The air became thinner, the sun harsher, and soon the three companions were feeling exhausted.

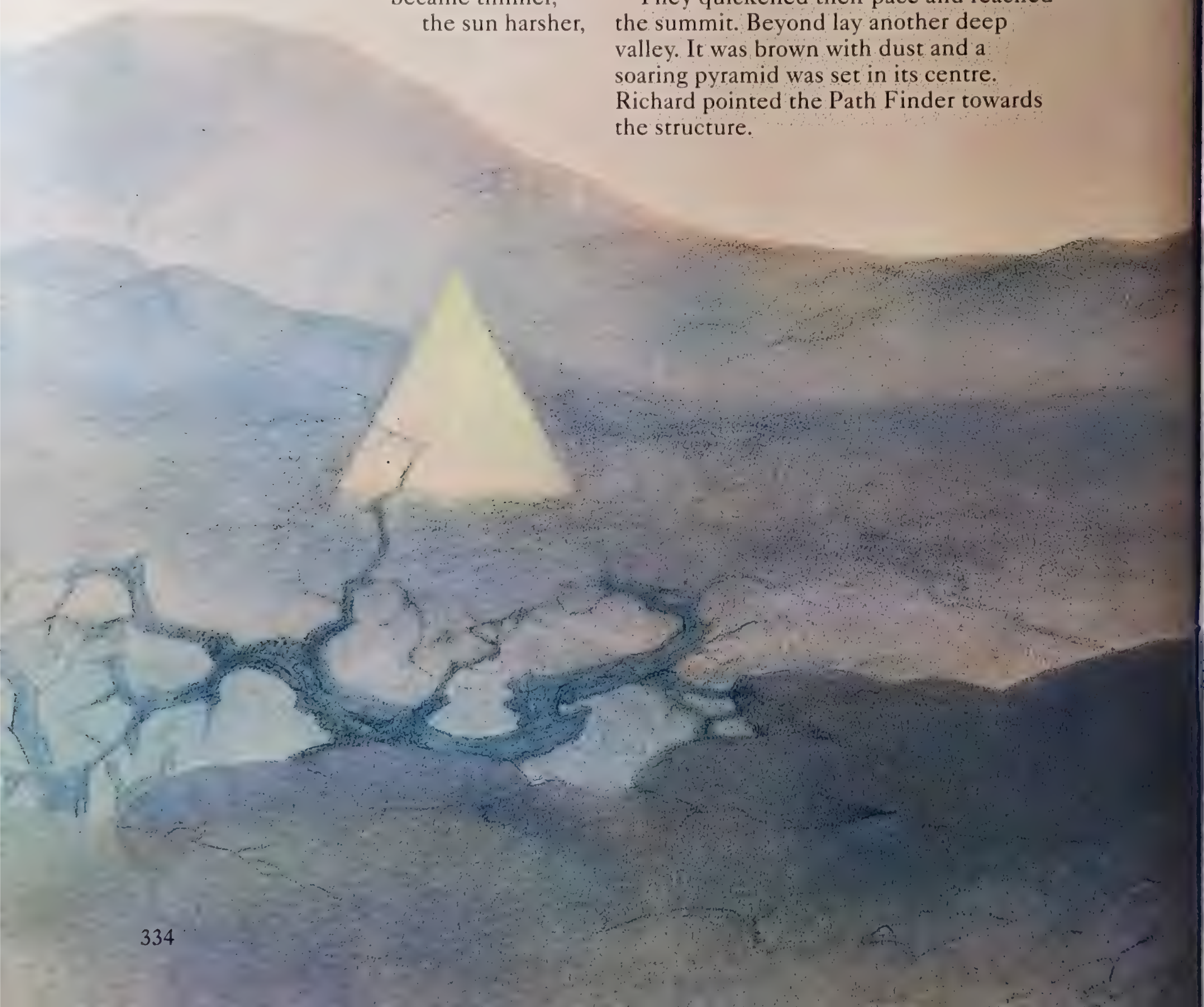
They had almost reached the top when they heard a howl. It came to them from a distance but was nevertheless recognizable as Stridor's angry call.

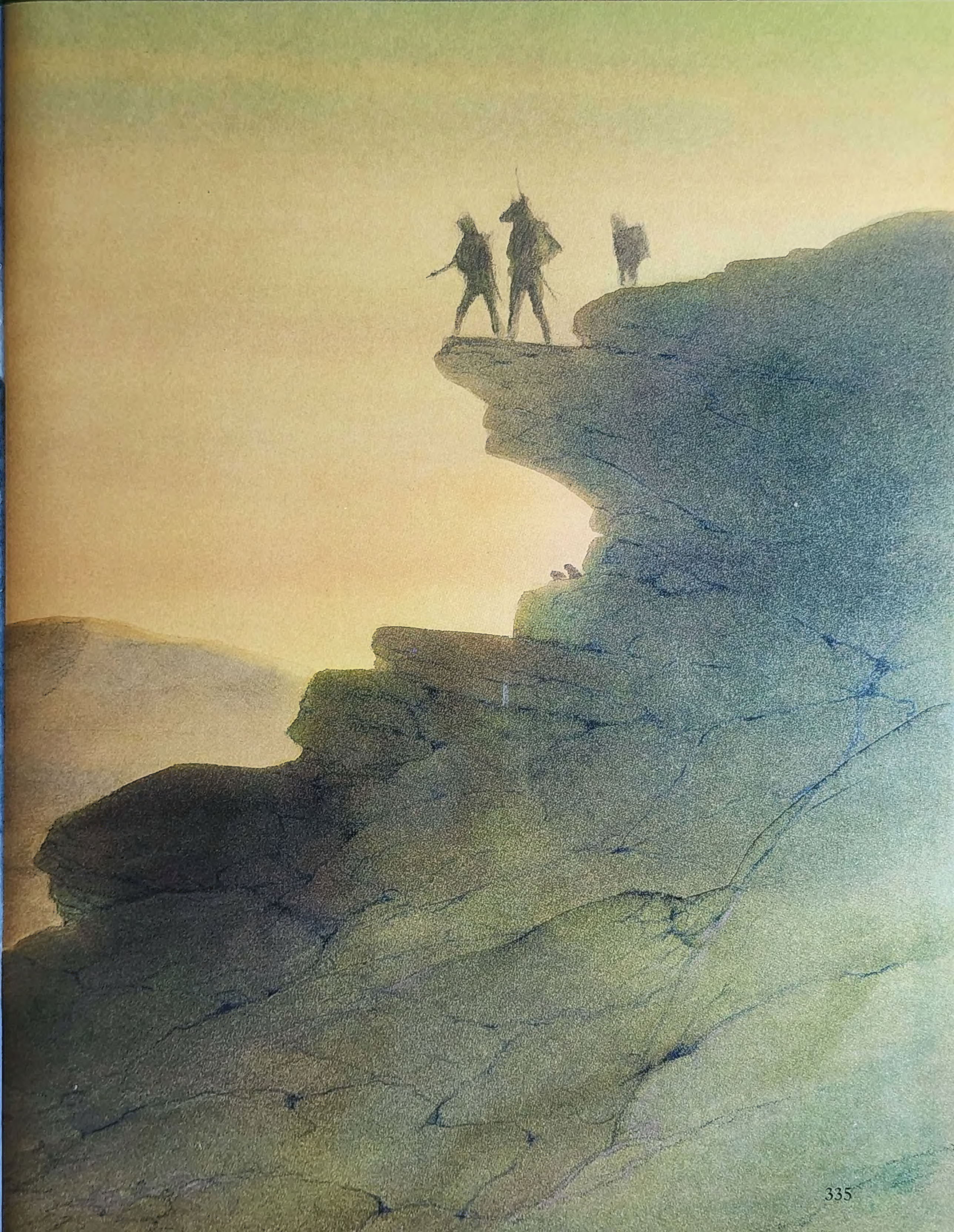
Stridor returns

The three turned round. Far away they saw a figure coming down the snowy heights they had left earlier. The Forgotten City's guardian had survived the avalanche.

"Trapped is not the same as dead!" Richard muttered.

They quickened their pace and reached the summit. Beyond lay another deep valley. It was brown with dust and a soaring pyramid was set in its centre. Richard pointed the Path Finder towards the structure.





"That's where we've got to go," Richard said.

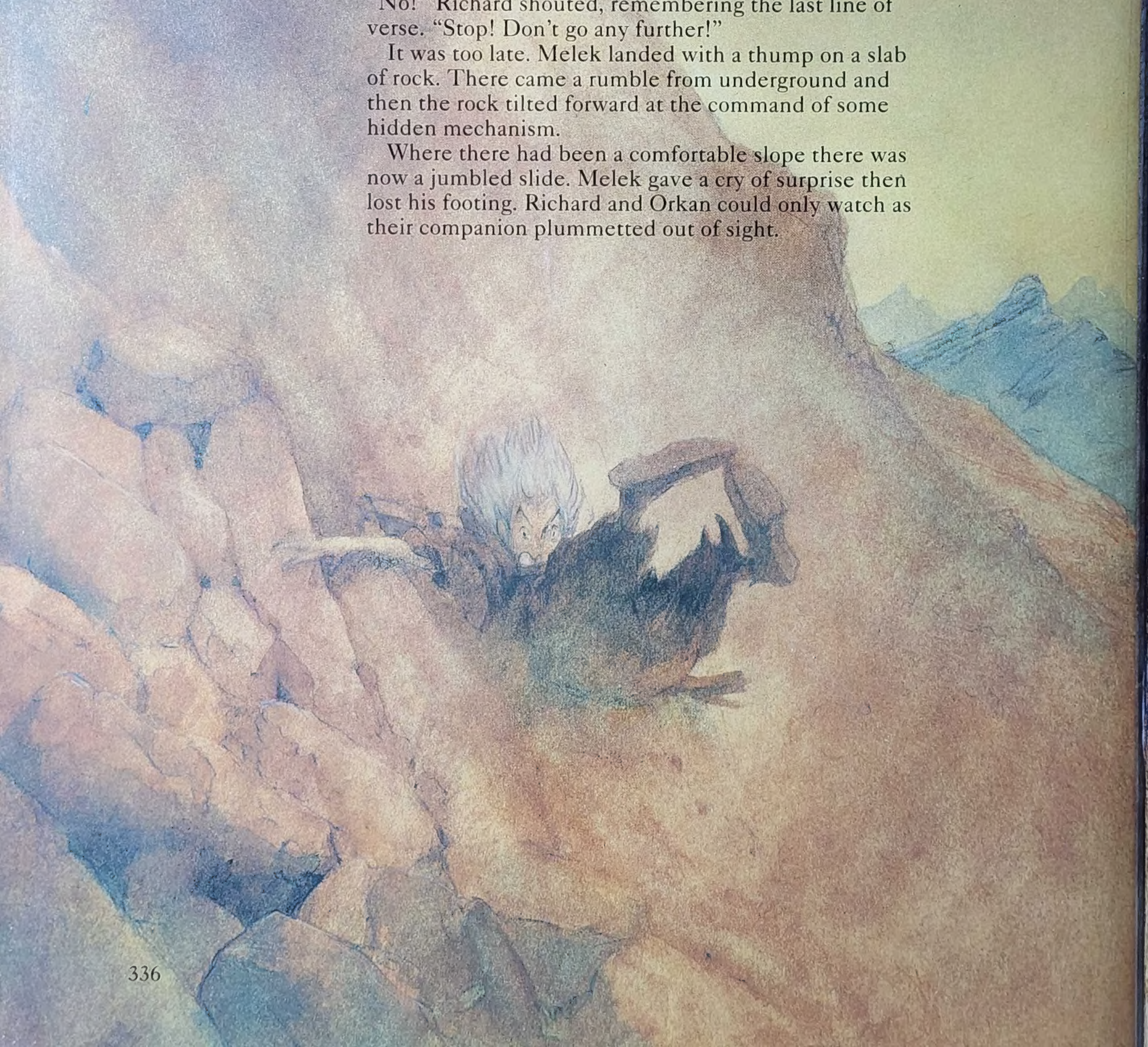
The ground made for easy walking. The hillside was covered with rock that had been worn smooth into a series of flat plates. Melek bounded excitedly past Richard and Orkan.

Hidden trap

"No!" Richard shouted, remembering the last line of verse. "Stop! Don't go any further!"

It was too late. Melek landed with a thump on a slab of rock. There came a rumble from underground and then the rock tilted forward at the command of some hidden mechanism.

Where there had been a comfortable slope there was now a jumbled slide. Melek gave a cry of surprise then lost his footing. Richard and Orkan could only watch as their companion plummetted out of sight.



Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Look out for these friendly little creatures again. They are still on the trail and hiding somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

In issue 20, Shoomi and Shoobi were hiding at the base of the ice arch on page 317.

3-Minute Challenge

Mask of Evil

A fragment of the Evil One's mask is hidden somewhere in the illustrations in this issue. Look carefully and see if you can find it in less than three minutes.

In issue 20, Spector's eye was hidden in the top of the arch on page 307.

Did you beat the challenge? If not, try again this time.

Monsters and Magic

When you have finished reading about the Lord of the Snowy Mountains, learn about Atlas and Big Foot. Which of these characters do you think Stridor is based on?

In issue 20, Spector, the one-eyed giant was based on the Cyclop.

The Ancestral Trail

Cut out the location recorder and tokens and add them to your collection of pieces for the role-playing game. More tokens and location recorders will be given in future issues. Be sure to keep your Ancestral Trail role-playing game and Monster Might cards safely together to avoid loss.

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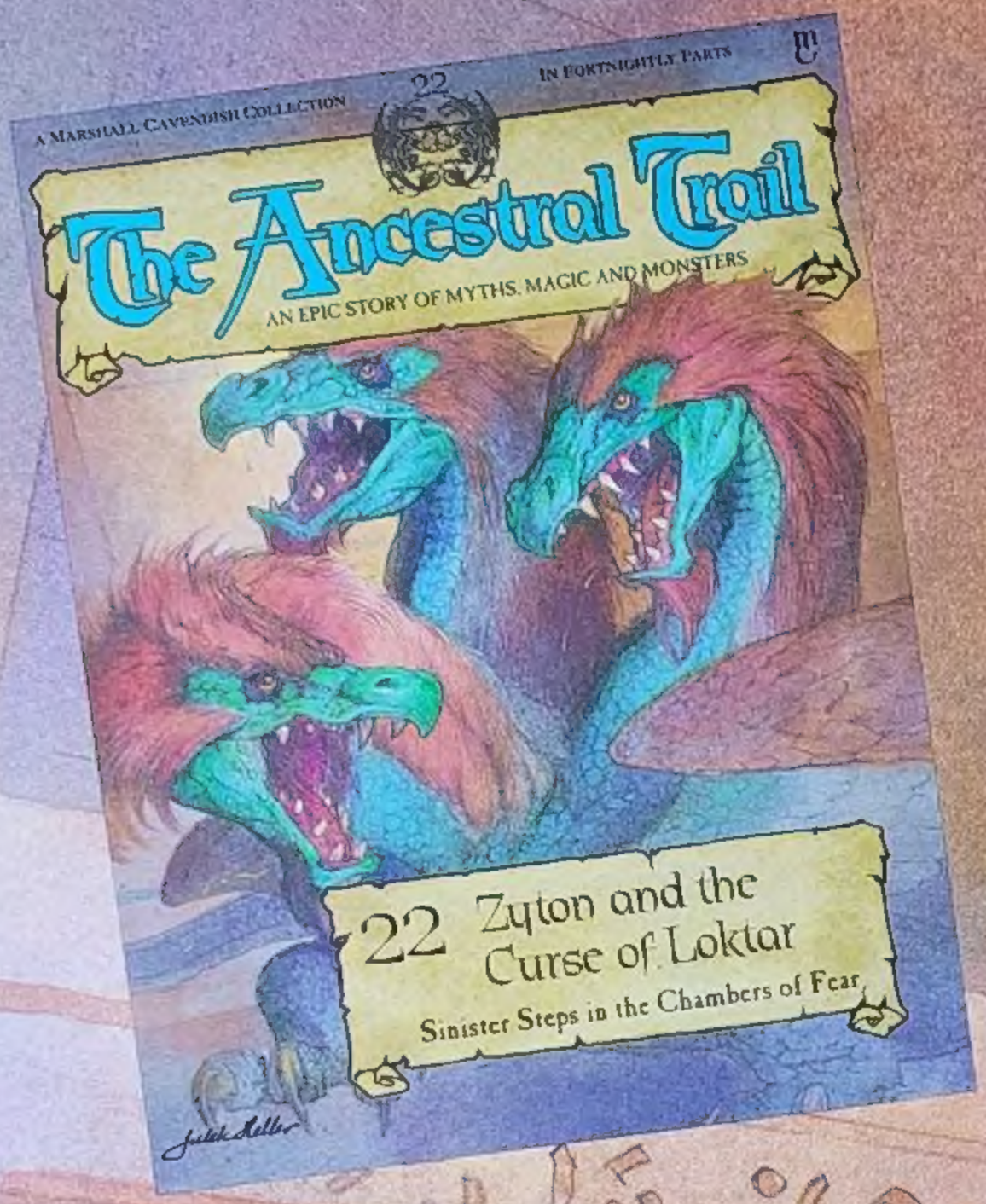
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22
IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS
The Ancestral Trail
AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS
22 Zyton and the Curse of Loktar
Sinister Steps in the Chambers of Fear

In Issue 22

Zyton and the Curse of Loktar

In their search for the hidden pod, the trio are faced with a fearsome triple-headed monster and unwittingly invoke the Curse of Loktar. Can they avoid the terrible consequences and escape with their precious prize?

plus

- Morbane's stories look at two creatures that would never yield to ordinary mortals.
- More pieces for the puzzle map.

Coming in Issue 23

Dagmar, Demon of Fire

The heroes face a double dilemma when they attempt to cross the forbidding chasm to Yellow Stone Peaks. Will their luck hold a little longer?

plus

From Morbane, two stories about creatures that are destroyed by wit • Another puzzle piece for the map • A location recorder.

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